



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

Breaking Open the Word

by Mary Birmingham

Breaking Open the Word Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion C



Christ Carrying the Cross as portrayed by EL GRECO
Domenikos Theotokopoulos, 1580

SIGN OF THE CROSS

OPENING PRAYER

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2.

Sing or recite the following hymn.

All glory, laud and honor,
To Thee, Redeemer, King,
To Whom the lips of children
Made sweet hosannas ring.

Thou art the King of Israel,
Thou David's royal Son,
Who in the Lord's Name comest,
The King and Blessed One.

The company of angels
Are praising Thee on High,
And we with all creation
In chorus make reply.

The people of the Hebrews
With psalms before Thee went;
Our prayer and praise and anthems
before Thee we present.

To Thee, before Thy passion,
They sang their hymns of praise;
To Thee, now high exalted,
Our melody we raise.

Thou didst accept their praises;
Accept the prayers we bring,
Who in all good delightest,
Thou good and gracious King.

(A traditional hymn for Palm Sunday, public domain)

**Catholic
Faith, Life
& Creed**
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Breaking Open the
Word worksheets
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Doctrinal Sessions.

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Liturgical Context

- ▶ Today is Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion, the beginning of the holiest week in our church calendar. Today we tell the story of the Lord's Passion and death from the evangelist Luke's perspective.
- ▶ Refer to Word and Worship Workbook Year C (Paulist Press) for a thorough treatment of Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion.
- ▶ Today we commemorate the Lord's triumphant entry into Jerusalem as well as his passion and death. We celebrate the Lord's entry by processing with palm branches.
- ▶ Palms were added to the solemn liturgy @the eighth century. Pagan belief suggested that palm branches contained special magical powers. Christianity appropriated the pagan use of palms by having them blessed, and using them in devotional practices intended to ask for protection from storms and from evil.
- ▶ There are three forms for the procession with palms. The first form harkens back to the earliest fourth century ritual. The liturgy begins in another place, palms are blessed, and the gospel is proclaimed and all solemnly process with branches into the church. The second, less solemn form begins in the church, outside the sanctuary. The gospel is proclaimed and the presider and others process with palm into the sanctuary. The third and least solemn—the simple entrance--begins with the presider processing into the church. The procession with palms is not to overshadow the proclamation of the passion.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, then surface insights in the wider group. (@Five to seven minutes)

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?

If time is a consideration, there may not be time to reflect on all of the readings of today's liturgy, you may only have time to concentrate on the Passion. You could simply read the interpretive material to give participants a sense of those texts and omit the reflection questions or you may omit some of the readings altogether. Participants could be given the reflection questions that were omitted for reflection in their journal throughout the coming week.

Entrance Gospel: Luke 19: 28-40

- ▶ We are told Jesus came from Bethany and Bethpage—house of the poor and house of figs—both were reminders of the judgment against Jerusalem.
- ▶ Jesus was one of God's poor among the poor heading for the place where prophets are put to death. Like the fig tree, Jerusalem did not produce what it was intended to produce. Judgment is against the holy city.
- ▶ Jerusalem was considered a holy place. In today's Gospel Luke uses the secular name for Jerusalem rather than the holy name. She was not deserving of her holy status.
- ▶ The long awaited messiah was prophesied to enter Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. Successors to ancient thrones mounted a donkey and rode triumphantly to accept their new royal throne.

- ▶ Jesus, the King enters Jerusalem as King and as the one who would come to save the world.
- ▶ Jesus processes to his coronation that would ultimately be a crown of thorns and the cross.
- ▶ The peace the angels proclaimed at his birth comes to fulfillment now in his death—only through his death will the peace of Eden be restored.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, then surface brief insights in the wider group.

- ▶ Consider your own personality and your faith, as you understand yourself.
- ▶ Do you think you would have been among those who waved their palms and later turned against Jesus with the rest of the crowd or would you have been among those who waved their palms and stood by him?
- ▶ What are the implications and challenge of your honest reflection?

First reading: Isaiah 50: 4-7

- ▶ Third song of the Servant of God
- ▶ The servant in Isaiah's reading would not be deterred in his mission to proclaim God's word. The people were tired of his futile optimism in the face of their suffering in exile. God gave him a word to speak to the people and nothing would keep him from doing the will of God.
- ▶ The Christian community believed that the suffering servant of Isaiah was Jesus. Jesus, like the servant, would not be deterred from his appointed mission—to love God's people, to teach them, to save them and to free them by his sacrificial death on the cross.
- ▶ Jesus' faithfulness to the mission God gave him resulted in his death (the fate of all prophets).



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story from his or her life. See appendix #1 for an example.

- ▶ Jesus was the Messiah and Savior, however he was also a Prophet. Prophets often bring a message that people resist—change is difficult and people do not like being

challenged, especially people in power. If we are all baptized into Jesus' priestly, royal and prophetic ministry, then we too are called to speak a prophetic word—even if it brings wrath down upon our heads. Can you imagine a situation in your life in which you might be called upon to speak a prophetic word? What would be the result? What are the implications of living the prophetic life? Jesus gave us an example—what are we to learn from his example?

Second Reading: Philippians 2: 6-11

- ▶ God's Son though he was, Jesus took the form of a slave.
- ▶ Many scholars believe that this is a hymn that was used in very ancient liturgies.
- ▶ Jesus humiliated himself, took the form of a slave and thus saved the world. He entered the human condition—he learned first hand what it meant to be rejected, betrayed, misunderstood, maligned, gossiped about, and hated. He was treated as a criminal.
- ▶ Jesus' perfect kenosis (outpouring of himself in total abandonment and humiliation) resulted in the resurrection and by extension the salvation of the human race.
- ▶ Paul was asking his factious community to accept the posture of Jesus. Jesus could have claimed special rights of nobility. He chose instead to come as one among the poor—to come as a slave. Paul reminds his divided community that if they would only assume Jesus' posture of self-abasement, there would be no need for divisions in the community.
- ▶ Jesus "became sin". He entered the human condition—he became one with us. He was like us in all things except sin.



Mystagogy reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, surface brief insights in wider group. Catechist responds with a "brief" story from his or her life. See appendix #2 for an example.

- ▶ Imagine how easily we get caught up in petty animosities, jealousies, and hatreds, not just of our own making but the making of others as well. The dark side of the human spirit is sorely tempted to enter the fray—to condemn others. Imagine how difficult it was for Jesus to keep his head above the fray. People get angry when others refuse to get caught up in sinful patterns with them. What does this reading teach us about Jesus? What does he have to teach us about all human relationships and the power struggles that take place within them? What is Jesus' response? What are the implications of Jesus' response?

Gospel: The Passion of Our Lord, Jesus Christ according to Luke

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ It is important to remember the context of the Passion story as told by the evangelist Luke. Luke was trying to portray Jesus in a balanced way in the face of Roman rule. Secular ancient sources record Jesus as a criminal deserving of death. Luke softens this portrayal and paints Pilate as a fair arbiter who affirmed his innocence.
- ▶ Self-serving, self-righteous men put Jesus to death. However, there were among them very religious, spiritual men who thought Jesus was a threat to Judaism and the Law of God. It is a reminder to us that we could very easily have been among those shouting for his death.
- ▶ Jesus takes his disciples to Mount Olivet to pray, as he did throughout his entire ministry. Luke's Jesus is a praying Jesus. Jesus asks his Father to strengthen him for the trial ahead, to help him persevere to the end—to be faithful to God's will.
- ▶ It is important to note that God could not will an evil action. Murder is an evil action. God did not will his Son's murder. God willed his Son's faithfulness and perseverance no matter what the consequences. Jesus' faithfulness resulted in his death.
- ▶ The word *agony* is translated to mean excessive tension that produces sweat in an athlete before a serious event. Jesus could only imagine what lie ahead.
- ▶ Peter is in anguish as he watches the face of his Master—not only because of his denial, but also because of the treatment his Master is receiving. The scene is dripping in irony. The authorities mocked and taunted Jesus calling him a prophet. Not that long ago Jesus prophesied that he would die a prophet in Jerusalem.
- ▶ He is led to the Sanhedrin. He does not call himself the Son of God or give his accusers reason to execute him.
- ▶ Herod professes Jesus' innocence. Jesus' ministry of reconciliation extended to these two secular rulers who previously were enemies and now as a result of this event were reconciled.
- ▶ Jesus forgives those who brought charges against him. It would seem that he does not hold them responsible. Commentators suggest that Luke does the same thing in the Acts of the Apostles, signifying that the entire situation was complicated. It is one thing to be aware of who Jesus was after the fact, quite another to be fully aware of his claims being authentic as they were unfolding.
- ▶ Jesus' healing, reconciling mission continues throughout his ministry up to his last breath. The religious leaders scoff at his offer of forgiveness but the people do not.
- ▶ Luke's Passion narrative is the only account of Jesus' death in which the thief is

saved at the eleventh hour and is offered salvation and eternal life.

- ▶ The Roman centurion also witnesses to Jesus' innocence.
- ▶ Luke's Jesus continued his ministry of unconditional love, healing, reconciliation and salvation all the way to Calvary.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. (@ Ten-twelve minutes)

- ▶ What touched you the most in this Passion narrative?
- ▶ How would you describe the primary message of the Passion to a non-believer?
- ▶ With whom do you most relate? Jesus? Pilate? Herod? The thief? The religious leaders? The crowd?
- ▶ What do you think of a God that would allow the brutal death of his only Son? What does that tell us about God? About God's relationship to us? Why did God allow his Son's death? (See appendix # 3 below) What are the implications?
- ▶ What is the challenge of the Passion? What does this passage call us to as Christians?
- ▶ In what way does it invite you to grow in faith and to be a better disciple?

Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question.

- ▶ After reflection on today's liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God's call?
- ▶ In what way does the Passion of Christ invite you more deeply into Christ's life, death and resurrection? (A good question for ongoing reflection in your journal throughout the week.)

Concluding Prayer

Prayer of Pope Clement XI

Lord, I believe in you: increase my faith.

I trust in you: strengthen my trust.

I love you: let me love you more and more.

I am sorry for my sins: deepen my sorrow.

I worship you as my first beginning.

I long for you as my last end.

I praise you as my constant helper.

And I call you as my loving protector.

I want to do what you ask of me:

In the way you ask, for as long as you ask, because you ask it.

Let me love you Lord as my God.

And see myself as I really am: a pilgrim in this world.

A Christian called to respect and love all those lives I touch.

APPENDIX

1. Right now our country is embroiled in so many divisive issues. Those on the right think they have God's favor, as do those on the left. Each group is unbending, unyielding and closed to listen to one another's perspectives.

It is difficult to preach the Gospel in the midst of the political camps that dot the landscape today. If I am pro-life from womb to tomb; if I treasure the precious life of the unborn and believe that baby has a right to live; if I am vehemently opposed to the death penalty because I believe the power over life and death belongs to God; if I am in favor of relaxing our borders because all I can think of is putting myself in the shoes of those who are trying to secure a better life for their families—a roof over their head, food on the table, education for their children and meaningful employment; if I favor helping illegal immigrants become legal, productive members of society; if I favor health care for all of our citizens as a human right; if I believe God put us on this earth to be good stewards of it and thus calls us to pay attention to all that we do to hurt God's creation, I do not fit in any one political party. No political party today embraces a Gospel perspective.

I embrace such issues because I believe they are constitutive of the Gospel. However, it is very difficult to say such a thing in our communities today without being accused of being a proponent of a particular party. It is also difficult to maintain a clean heart in the midst of all the controversy. Like it or not, we are impacted by political ideologies of the day. All I can do is forge ahead and ask that God give me a clean heart, challenge my motives and when I am wrong correct me. My fear is that when I do exercise my prophetic role I am truly exercising the mind and heart of God. We can fool ourselves. Jesus went to his death because of human sin. I am called to pattern my life after his sacrificial life and death.

The prayer of the psalmist must be ever on my lips if I am to preach and live a just and true word, "Create in me a clean heart O Lord. Put a steadfast spirit in me; cast me not away from your presence, and take not your spirit from me. Give me the joy of your salvation and a willing spirit sustain in me. I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners shall return to you. (Ps. 51)" Jesus went to his death because he did not care what apple cart he upset. He was a voice for truth and righteousness. He spoke up for those who could not speak for themselves. It is important for me to remember that Jesus had very little tolerance for the self-righteous. It was they who were most responsible for his death. I pray that God cast away any self-righteousness lurking within me—that he creates in me a clean heart. That is why he died. That was his gift to all of us. May I live up to so great a gift!

2. I once was heavily embroiled in a parish controversy. Sides were taken. Friends were forged only with people on one's own side. When we gathered with friends on our side of the controversy we often gave into the temptation to demonize those with whom we had issues. I remember the feeling of dripping sin creeping up my spine and into my consciousness. It was most unpleasant. I remember the looks and stares when one of us

tried on occasion to be a voice of reconciliation or at the very least try to stop the demonization.

The same thing was happening on the other side of the controversy. A man came up to me after all had blown over and told me he wanted to apologize. He was new to the parish. He was told he should hate me and he admitted that he did hate me without having ever met me. He was so sorry for his sin. I too apologized for my contribution.

I often reflected on how it must have been for Jesus. Fully human, like us in all ways but sin, he NEVER gave in to those temptations. He was always the voice of love. No wonder it led to his death. People can feed off of the crowd mentality of anger, hatred and accusations. Jesus died showing us another way. My prayer is that I have the courage to exercise my prophetic role if ever faced with a similar situation.

3. Whenever I question why God willed the death of his only Son I refer to Louis Marie Chauvet. Within every sacrament we experience the total kenosis ----self-emptying of Jesus on the cross---an emptying he gives as a sign of God's love for the human race. Sacramental theologian Louis Marie Chauvet insists that in every sacrament we are privileged participants in the drama between the Father and the Son—the son who completely empties himself in the face of total abandonment. The innocent tortured Son who echoes psalm 22's lament of an innocent sufferer—"My God, My God why have you abandoned me?" In the sacraments we are given privileged access to the intimacy between the Father and the Son---the grief-stricken Father, the near despairing and ultimately abandoned Son.

The Father Jesus defended with his life is the same Father who could send armies to rescue him. Yet, what does God do? God remains silent. The Father hides his face. What kind of a Father is he? He is a Father not just of the Son, but of all those the Son came to save. Jesus had work left to do—he had to take his love for humanity to its final and ultimate conclusion. To be in solidarity with the human condition meant that Jesus had to experience death in the face of God's silence, a God who spares no one from it—not even his own faithful Son.

Jesus had to experience the absolute separation of human death and abandonment before he could be truly one with the human race. Chauvet insists that the Paschal Mystery that is present in the sacraments introduces us to a Christ who knows what it means to be abandoned, tortured and seemingly without hope –who poured himself out for every broken person in the world---for us in our times of abandonment and who invites us to offer the same kenosis for others.

Every time we come to the sacraments we are invited to empty ourselves as offering for those who are most abandoned and in so doing share in the ongoing redemption of the cross. What Christ says to us in the sacraments is: DO you know how much I love you? "This much." Then he stretched out his arms and he died.



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Cross of Christ
Sacraments
Overview of Triduum

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the index of doctrinal topics and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

CROSS OF CHRIST

Today's liturgy is an extended meditation on the cross of Christ. Let us continue our reflection on the cross of Christ in our extended session today. Today's doctrinal session will focus on the **CROSS OF JESUS CHRIST**.

SACRAMENTS

Every sacrament makes present the Paschal Mystery of Christ. In other words, every sacrament brings before us Christ's sacrificial death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead. We remember and made present those saving events in every sacramental celebration. Thus today's extended session will focus on the **SACRAMENTS** of the Church.

OVERVIEW OF TRIDUUM (see the doctrinal worksheet with that theme)

Today's extended session will focus on the outline you have just been given that expresses what we are about to celebrate in the liturgies of Holy Week.